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Tony Blair Needs a Plan. Suggestions for the Working Agenda of the New Representative of the Middle East Quartet

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On 27 June 2007, immediately after relinquishing his post as Prime Minister, Tony Blair became the new representative of the Middle East Quartet, which consists of delegates from the United Nations, the European Union, the United States and Russia. His nomination was the reaction to a spate of violence between supporters of Al-Fatah and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. In the middle of June 2007 this led to a split between the West Bank, where Al-Fatah has the upper hand, and the Gaza Strip, which is under the control of Hamas. Blair thus succeeds the former head of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, who was appointed to the post of special representative entrusted with the task of supervising the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip after the withdrawal of Israeli soldiers and settlers in April 2005. However, Wolfensohn tendered his resignation a year later on account of the lack of progress in the peace process.

The Middle East Quartet, which was set up in 2002, is a consultative mechanism of the most important external actors which seeks to support the peace and negotiating process between Israel and the Palestinians. The members of the Quartet agree that the Middle East conflict can only be resolved on the basis of a convincing and long-term perspective for Israel and the Palestinians. The key to overcoming the conflict resides in the concept of "land for peace," that is, the foundation of a sovereign Palestinian state which is prepared to recognize the existence of Israel and its security needs. A three-step plan based on idea of the two-state solution, which has since become known as the "road map", was adopted in April 2003. It was accepted as a peace plan by both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and given legitimacy by UN Security Council resolution 1515. However, the road map has not as yet been implemented. There are numerous reasons for this, and they include the weakness of Israeli and Palestinian leaders and a lack of sufficient political pressure from the Quartet. The situation has become even more complicated as a result of the fact that, after the democratic elections held in early 2006, the Hamas movement was able to form the government in the autonomous Palestinian territories. However, Hamas is deemed to be a terrorist organization by the U.S., the EU and Israel. As a precondition for direct negotiations with Hamas, the Quartet has stipulated that it must comply with three conditions. These are that it must recognize Israel, renounce violence, and respect existing agreements. However, Hamas has resolutely refused to explicitly do any of these things.

Framework: Middle East Quartet and road map

Revival of Quartet under
German EU Presidency

The Middle East Quartet was revived in the first half of 2007 during the then German EU presidency, and Tony Blair's appointment should be seen in the context of what preceded it. At the beginning of January Chancellor Angela Merkel travelled to Washington in order to persuade President George W. Bush to play a more active part in the Quartet. President Bush had outlined the vision of a two-state solution in a speech given in June 2002, but subsequently the U.S. government failed to come up with a new political initiative in the Middle East. Bush concurred with Merkel's proposals, and as a result the Quartet met on five occasions between January and July 2007 on the level of principals.

In February and April 2007 Merkel in her capacity as the incumbent of the EU Presidency travelled to the Middle East in order to canvas support among moderate Arab states for the new activities of the Quartet. Other positive developments included the fact that U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice regularly contrived to facilitate talks between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, that in February 2007 Saudi Arabia brokered a Palestinian government of National Unity consisting of Al-Fatah and Hamas, and that in March the Arab League meeting in Riyadh confirmed that it stood by its 2002 Middle East peace plan. For a short period of time it seemed as if the conditions for a revival of the peace process were propitious.

Blair's official mandate

In the statement issued on 27 June 2007, the members of the Quartet gave Blair the following mandate. As "Quartet representative" he will

- Mobilize international assistance to the Palestinians, working closely with donors and existing coordination bodies;
- Help to identify and secure appropriate international support in addressing the institutional governance needs of the Palestinian State, focusing as a matter of urgency on the rule of law;
- Develop plans to promote Palestinian economic development, including private sector partnerships, building on previously agreed frameworks, especially concerning access and movement; and
- Liaise with other countries as appropriate in support of the agreed Quartet objectives.

In order to perform this task the document indicates Blair is to spend a significant amount of time in the region and will be supported by a small team of experts based in Jerusalem. They will be seconded by the members of the Quartet. In his capacity as its representative, Blair also takes part at the meetings of the Quartet.

Appointment a source
of contention

The appointment of Blair was a source of contention within the Quartet, and it seems that President Bush decided to nominate him without consulting anyone else. In doing so he was prepared to put up with opposition, especially from Russia, whose relations with the United Kingdom are currently at a low ebb as a result of charges of espionage and the mysterious death in London in November 2006 of Alexander Litvinenko, who was poisoned with a radioactive substance. The German EU presidency, which represented the EU in the Quartet, and the EU High Representative, Javier Solana, were displeased by the uncoordinated nature of the American and British decision. Whereas it is true that the Quartet has not called into question the leadership role of the U.S., the latter had clearly failed to communicate with its partners in a transparent manner. Two factors are now clearly apparent: On the one hand, the predominant position of the U.S. in the Quartet is capable of creating problems for the Europeans, since it can curtail their freedom

to make decisions and to act in certain ways. On the other hand, the whole matter revealed that there had been insufficient communication between the UK and its European partners. Under these circumstances it is questionable whether Blair will be able to carry out his mandate successfully, since he depends on the support of all the members of the Quartet.

There may well be disagreement about who is responsible for what within the European component of the Quartet: on the principals level the EU is represented by a troika consisting of the Foreign Minister of the country which holds the EU Presidency, the Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, and the High Representative, Javier Solana, and on the envoys level by its special representative, Marc Otte. The appointment of Blair means that the Quartet is now being joined by a high-ranking European politician. However, it is as yet unclear how he will fit in with both principals and envoys. Solana in particular has made a name for himself in the Middle East in his capacity as EU High Representative. His functions could easily overlap with those of Blair unless it is made clear that the Quartet principals are Blair's superiors and that the Quartet envoys are there to support him in the capitals of the external mediators. It also remains to be seen how the former British Prime Minister's new role will fit into the Middle East agenda of his successor Gordon Brown and the new Foreign Secretary David Miliband.

Who is speaking on behalf of the EU?

Blair's appointment symbolizes the need to put transatlantic cooperation on a sound footing. However, it could also turn out to be a problem, especially with regard to how Blair is seen in the Arab world (where he is accused of being prejudiced and of having cooperated with the U.S. in the Iraq war). Yet at the same time Blair might also strengthen the European component of the Quartet. During his time as prime minister of the UK there were often limits to what he could do in Europe on account of the eurosceptic attitude of his electorate. In his new position Blair might well be able to act with a greater degree of freedom. The presence of a former prime minister of the stature of Blair could also enhance the extent to which the Europeans are visible and their political influence. Blair has an intimate knowledge of how the conflicts in the region interlock, partly because British troops are stationed in Iraq, and partly on account of his role in the EU3 negotiations with Iran. Furthermore, in the past he has mediated between pro-Israeli and pro-Arab tendencies in the EU member states. His experience in dealing with the conflict in Northern Ireland will no doubt stand him in good stead.

European component strengthened?

Blair will have to work at his popularity and credibility in the Arab world, which, on account of his support for the Iraq war, have been badly dented, primarily among the local population. In the recent past the Quartet has increasingly begun to seek support for the peace process from moderate Arab states on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative, and for this reason it will be of the utmost importance to see whether or not Blair manages to mobilize the Arab states.

Lack of popularity in the Arab world

Over and above the question of whether Blair has the support of the Quartet and is accepted by the parties to the conflict and their Arab neighbours, the nature of his mandate is of crucial importance for the success or failure of his mission. The statement issued on 27 June 2007 makes it clear that Blair will possess a primarily economic mandate. It tells him to start out from previously agreed frameworks, which were primarily established in the recent past by the European Union, the most important donor of development aid to the Palestinians. Furthermore, it is the task of Blair and his team to introduce measures designed to stabilize the insti-

Politically weak mandate

tutional governance needs of the Palestinian Authority, focusing as a matter of urgency on the rule of law. However, in the current situation it is questionable whether Blair can achieve very much with this mandate. His predecessor Wolfensohn only possessed an economic mandate, and it turned out that what he could do was limited, even though in early 2005 the Palestinian territories were relatively stable. The escalation of internal Palestinian strife and the division of the autonomous and occupied territories suggest that what is needed in the current situation is a political initiative. However, Blair does not possess an explicitly political mandate, and it is doubtful whether the Quartet will grant him one. But with his experience as prime minister behind him, his great personal motivation, and the potential of the Quartet institution, Blair might be able to achieve more in his capacity as Quartet representative than his predecessor.

Two-speed path for
Palestinian statehood

Thus in the situation as it is a new political initiative is necessary. If the two-state solution is still construed as the way in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be resolved, then Blair and the Quartet must soon decide on how this might possibly be implemented in the light of internal Palestinian strife, regular Qassam missile attacks on the small Israeli town of Sderot and the construction of illegal Israeli settlements on the West Bank. If the Quartet considers President Mahmoud Abbas and his emergency government to be the Palestinian partner with which it wishes to work and Israel agrees, then there would now be an opportunity to begin with the formation of a Palestinian state with provisional borders, initially on the West Bank. A two-speed strategy of this kind could constitute the basis of Blair's agenda.

It remains to be seen how the situation in the Gaza Strip will develop under the Hamas government. However, this Palestinian autonomous area can become part of the nascent statehood in the West Bank at a later stage. There ought to be unambiguous agreements on what needs to be done to prevent a permanent split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This once again demonstrates the inadequacy of the U.S. and EU decision to boycott Hamas, for the Quartet may now be largely excluded from the Gaza Strip altogether.

Momentum for endgame
negotiations

At first sight the current situation does not seem particularly propitious when it comes to thinking about negotiated settlements and a continuance of the peace process. Yet it is quite possible that the seemingly hopeless situation will generate a momentum which will demonstrate that there is no alternative to the two-state solution. Israel and the Palestinians or the PLO as their legitimate representative could then be induced to return to the negotiating table. The Quartet should be prepared to take advantage of a momentum of this kind, and this is where its new special representative Blair can show what he can do.

Suggestions for a "Blair Plan"

For this reason, as Blair assembles his team, he should move quickly to develop a short- to medium-term working agenda. His first actions as Quartet representative will determine the perception of his role for the foreseeable future. If he has a political agenda of his own, he will be able to define his role so that it transcends a merely economic mandate. The "Blair Plan" could perhaps contain the following suggestions:

- The establishment of a permanent working group chaired by Blair and his team which would include representatives from Israel, the PLO and the Arab League, and has the support of the Middle East Quartet;

- The establishment of a team consisting of moderate Arab states whose task would be to support the working group and, if possible, to maintain lines of communication with Hamas in the Gaza Strip;
- The establishment of a two-track negotiating strategy in the working group in order to make it possible to deal with strategic questions (that is, finalizing the implementation of the road map) and to adopt urgent measures designed to improve the living conditions of the Palestinians, above all in the Gaza Strip;
- The extension of the mandate from the Middle East Quartet to cover the Israeli-Lebanese and the Israeli-Syrian negotiating track, since a permanent solution to the Middle East conflict can be reached only in the shape of a package deal;
- The definition of a line of argument, the purpose of which will be to deal with Islamist political parties and movements in the Middle East and North Africa. These organizations are extremely diverse, differ from country to country, and already have deputies in a number of parliaments. Both the European Union and the Quartet should discuss ways of integrating them in a positive way into conflict management and conflict solutions. In this area Blair could make an upbeat statement and thus initiate the debate.

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